

Roles, Missions, and Functions: Terms of Debate

By DANIEL T. KUEHL and CHARLES E. MILLER

The terms *roles*, *missions*, and *functions* are often used interchangeably to refer to a single concept. To many the terms are virtually synonymous: they all mean "what the services do." In one sense that is true. But they also have finite and statutory meanings which stem from what the services do and who makes the assignments. As Congress and the services begin what promises to be an intense and possibly contentious look at roles, missions, and functions,¹ it is helpful to review the origin and usage of these terms as well as prospects for reallocating what they signify.

Terms of Art

Roles date from the National Security Act of 1947 which set out the basic purpose of each service.² The Air Force was to be "organized, trained, and equipped primarily for prompt and sustained offensive and defensive air operations."³ Title 10, U.S. Code, currently contains the same statement for the Air Force as well as similar ones for the other services. Essentially, roles establish each service's primacy in its respective form or arena of war: land, sea, or air.

Missions date from the Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 which designated commanders of unified and specified commands as *combatant commanders* (CINCs) directly responsible to the President and Secretary of Defense. The job of carrying out broad operational missions now belonged to joint organizations and not to the

services which became in effect force providers for CINCs. The missions of the combatant commanders, however, should not be confused with those of the individual services.

Functions also date from 1947 when President Truman issued an executive order on the "Functions of the Armed Forces."⁴ They include those various activities, operations, and capabilities for which the services were responsible and for which they were charged with the "organizing, training, and equipping" of forces. The Air Force, for example, had seven functions:

- ▼ air operations (including joint operations)
- ▼ general air supremacy
- ▼ local air superiority
- ▼ strategic air operations (including reconnaissance)
- ▼ airlift and support for airborne operations
- ▼ air support for land and naval forces
- ▼ air transport.

Less than a year after Truman's executive order was issued, the Key West agreement⁵ listed service functions in greater detail and distinguished between primary and collateral functions as illustrated by the following list of Air Force functions:⁶

primary

- ▼ gain/maintain air superiority
- ▼ air defense of the United States
- ▼ strategic air warfare
- ▼ interdiction of enemy land power and communications
- ▼ close combat and logistical air support
- ▼ intelligence (including tactical intelligence) and aerial photography
- ▼ airlift, air transport and resupply, and support for airborne and amphibious operations

collateral

- ▼ interdict enemy sea power
- ▼ antisubmarine warfare and shipping protection
- ▼ aerial minelaying.

Air Force operations during World War II provided notable examples of each of these functions.

The legal basis for functions is found in DOD Directive 5100.1 which specifies 17 primary functions, 4 collateral functions, 4 responsibilities concerning space, and 4 responsibilities relating to combat operations in support of other services which are assigned to the Air Force (those of the other services are equally detailed). The following list summarizes the functions of the Air Force:⁷

primary

- ▼ air combat operations
- ▼ air and missile defense and space control
- ▼ strategic air and missile operations
- ▼ joint amphibious, space, and airborne operations
- ▼ support of the Army—close air support (CAS), logistics, airlift, resupply, aerial photography, tactical air reconnaissance, and interdiction
- ▼ aerial imagery
- ▼ space launch and space support
- ▼ aerial tanker operations
- ▼ air lines of communication
- ▼ special operations and psychological operations
- ▼ electronic warfare

collateral

- ▼ sea surveillance and antisurface ship warfare
- ▼ antisubmarine warfare
- ▼ aerial minelaying
- ▼ aerial refueling in support of naval campaigns

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responsibilities in support of space

- ▼ organize, train, equip, and provide space forces
- ▼ develop tactics and techniques for space operations
- ▼ exercises involving space force
- ▼ participate with other services in joint space operations, training, and exercises

responsibilities in support of combat operations by other services

- ▼ amphibious and airborne operations and procedures
- ▼ CAS.

Institutional Debate

One result of examining service functions is an apparent overlap which commonly is seen as duplication. For example, the Navy and Marines are both assigned the function of prosecuting electronic warfare, as are the Army and Air Force. Each service is therefore authorized to expend resources and develop forces to prosecute electronic warfare. Even though this is accomplished from the relatively unique perspectives of individual services, areas of warfare overlap are inevitable. The military planner sees this as a prudent hedge and a provision of complementary capabilities to defeat complementary threats; outside observers probably see it as typical Pentagon waste. When the public hears that the F-4G, EF-111, and EA-6B all perform an electronic warfare mission, they may assume that this reveals redundancy that warrants cutting fat to realize savings, and usually no explanation, however elaborate, that the three aircraft perform significantly different parts of the electronic warfare mission will allay their criticisms.

The complexity of the situation is exacerbated by lines of authority which are not as clean as commonly believed. Congress assigns roles in the respective arenas of war (that is, land, sea, and air) while the executive branch (the President through the Secretary of Defense) assigns detailed functions and authorizes the development of forces to carry them out. But the services do not employ these forces, CINCs do in order to accomplish the missions assigned to

them by the President and Secretary of Defense. This places the human beings who carry out the functions and missions in a bit of a quandary since they are responding to two different lines of authority, one running to the service secretaries and military departments and a *mission* line running through CINCS to the Secretary of Defense and President. To recapitulate: services develop forces but do not employ them, while combatant commands, under joint doctrine, employ forces but do not develop them. To make matters worse, the services then overlay this process with their unique doctrines, and when services allude to missions they are almost always referring to their doctrinal missions, not to those of combatant commands.

The current debate on roles and missions is occurring in an era of congressionally-driven emphasis on jointness. The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 requires the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) to review the "assignment of functions (or roles and missions)" of the Armed Forces. Two such reviews have been carried out to date, one by Admiral William Crowe in 1989 (which was delivered only two days before his term expired) and another by General Colin Powell in 1993. Both reports have been criticized for recommending what some consider to be only marginal changes.⁸ Crowe stated that service roles were "fundamentally sound," but that their functions should be revised to reflect current strategy, new technology, and changing threats to national security. He made four specific recommendations within the context of a suggested revision of DOD Directive 5100.1:⁹

- ▼ a report on roles and missions should be required every two years
- ▼ reports should delineate service functions with greater precision and clarity
- ▼ CAS should be a primary function of each service
- ▼ the Air Force should have primary responsibility for space functions.

General Powell's final report visited the following specific issues:¹⁰

- ▼ a joint headquarters for U.S.-based forces
- ▼ assigning space to STRATCOM
- ▼ four air forces
- ▼ best mix of aircraft for interdiction
- ▼ realigning the CAS mission
- ▼ eliminating/reducing Marine air wings
- ▼ consolidating flight training
- ▼ who should perform combat search and rescue (CSAR)?
- ▼ duplication of multi-service jammer and electronic intelligence (ELINT) aircraft
- ▼ further reduction of U.S. forward deployments
- ▼ duplication of Army and Marine expeditionary capability
- ▼ who should perform theater air defense (TAD)?
- ▼ further restructuring of intelligence organizations
- ▼ active and Reserve component mix.

Congressional Action

This debate now features a congressionally-mandated Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces (see *The Joint World* in this issue of *JFQ* for details). The commission is the result of new considerations such as the end of the Cold War, fiscal constraints, and perhaps most importantly a congressional perception that the two CJCS reports were not comprehensive and thus the Armed Forces need impetus from outside to reform. Key issues that the commission will examine are duplication of effort, improvement in interoperability and military effectiveness, gaps in mission coverage, and the impact of advanced technology. The commission's charter virtually assures that its recommendations will be unsettling to the existing structure of roles, missions, and functions. Questions that the commission is likely to take up include:

- ▼ do we need two (Army/Marine) expeditionary ground forces?
- ▼ how many air forces do we need?

- ▼ does everyone need to perform CAS as a primary function?
- ▼ who should defend aerospace (from ground into space)?
- ▼ sea-based versus land-based aerial power projection
- ▼ duplication of helicopter forces and capabilities
- ▼ duplication of other operational functions (reconnaissance, electronic warfare, et al.)
- ▼ duplication of intelligence functions
- ▼ consolidated training, logistics, and support services
- ▼ new post-Cold War missions such as peace operations, et al.
- ▼ new functionally-based services (special operations, space, et al.).

If Carl Builder is correct in his analysis that the services possess almost human instincts for self-preservation, the evolving roles and missions debate could be contentious in a manner unseen since the so-called "Admirals' revolt" of 1949. Given the synergistic influences of an unsettled and murky geopolitical situation, a declining budget whose low point has not been reached, and threats to institutional relevance and survival, the upcoming debate has real potential for becoming a bureaucratic back-alley fight.

Arenas of War

Uncertainty over roles and missions and decades-old bureaucratic jockeying for position is probably inevitable; perhaps the problem is that technology has outstripped the ability of existing organizations to effectively and efficiently enfold new technologies. When the National Security Act of 1947 created the existing organizational structure there were three arenas of warfare: land, sea, and air. With the turn of the century—indeed the end of a millennium—new and evolving arenas are influencing not only how forces are organized, trained, and equipped, but also their very missions. The ubiquity of electronic warfare suggests that the electromagnetic spectrum is a new arena which must be dominated to be successful militarily. Space is another arena, more familiar perhaps than electronic warfare since space, at least, is a physical

medium in which objects move and can be seen and acted on. If futurists are correct, information-processing technologies—what some call cyberspace—might be another arena of war that must be dominated to maintain national security and be victorious in future battles. Even a simple listing of current and potential arenas suggests a radical change in the way we think about service roles and missions:

current arenas of warfare

- ▼ land—Army
- ▼ sea—Navy
- ▼ amphibious—Marine Corps
- ▼ air—Air Force

potential arenas of warfare

- ▼ space
- ▼ electromagnetic spectrum
- ▼ cyberspace-information warfare
- ▼ peace operations—peacekeeping and peace enforcement.

Current scrutiny of overlapping missions and duplication of capabilities among the services may, in fact, be small potatoes when compared to the significant changes in roles, missions, and functions in the future. Issues such as evolving arenas of war may actually pose much more disruptive challenges to the way the Armed Forces "organize, train, equip, and employ" in the next century. A service with vision—and that is both intellectually and organizationally ready to grasp "God's coattail" (as Otto von Bismarck quipped)—will be the best placed to be militarily dominant when the future is *now*. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ For example, see Theresa Hitchens and Robert Holzer, "Air Force, Navy Dispute Roles Amid DOD Study," *Defense News*, March 7–13, 1994, p. 4.

² While this article uses the Air Force to illustrate specific roles and functions, it does not intentionally seek to promote the roles and functions of one service over those of others.

³ See Richard I. Wolf, *The USAF: Basic Documents on Roles and Missions* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1987), document 7, Public Law 253 (July 26, 1947), which is better known as the National Security Act of 1947, p. 76.

⁴ Ibid., document 5, Executive Order no. 9877 (July 26, 1947), p. 90.

⁵ See also Barry M. Blechman, et al., "Key West Revisited: Roles and Missions of the U.S. Armed Forces in the Twenty-First Century," report no. 8 (Washington: Henry L. Stimson Center, March 1993), p. iii.

⁶ *Primary* functions authorize a service to develop force structure to accomplish them and *collateral* functions pertain to activities in support of other services and, in effect, have to be taken "out of hide"; *ibid.*, document 7, "Key West Agreement" (April 21, 1948), pp. 163–64.

⁷ Department of Defense Directive 5100.1, "Functions of the Department of Defense and its Major Components," September 25, 1987, pp. 19–21.

⁸ See General Accounting Office, "Roles and Functions: Assessment of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Report" (Washington: General Accounting Office, July 1993); see also Stephen C. LeSeuer, "Congress Forces Roles Issue," in *Defense News*, November 27, 1993, pp. 3, 27.

⁹ William J. Crowe, Jr., memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, subject: "Report on Roles and Functions of the Armed Forces," dated November 2, 1989, pp. 15, 19–22.

¹⁰ Colin L. Powell, *Report on the Roles, Missions, and Functions of the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington: Joint Chiefs of Staff, February 1993), pp. xxii–xxx.

¹¹ LeSeuer, "Congress Forces Roles Issue," p. 3.

¹² Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 27–30.

¹³ For an account of this event, see Philip S. Meilinger, "The Admirals' Revolt of 1949: Lessons for Today," *Parameters*, vol. 19, no. 3 (September 1989), pp. 81–96.